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AUTHOR Nelson, Jack A.
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ABSTRACT

In a time of modern magazine management practices and well-researched corporate decisions, the development of "Esquire" magazine in 1933 offers a refreshing example of Entrepreneurship. David A. Smart, publisher of "Esquire," "Coronet" (an arts magazine) and "Ken" (a news weekly), plunged ahead in the magazine business where other publishers would not have dared to venture. After his success with "Esquire," he started "Coronet," a magazine so richly illustrated that it became a collector's item. Smart believed the magazine was something the public ought to like, and if it did not make money it could be supported by "Esquire's" profits. Another art magazine, "VerveMDNM," that Smart bought on a whim, printed specially commissioned covers by some of the world's greatest artists. However, "Ken," the liberal newsweekly started before World War II, folded when the editors found that advertisers did not like their political articles. Teaming up with Arnold Gingrich as the editorial genius behind his magazines, Smart built a publishing empire that set the way for other magazines to follow. In some ways, as with his art magazines, he was ahead of his time. In addition, "Esquire" magazine led the way for dozens of imitators that filled the "girlie-magazine" gap when Smart's publication moved toward greater respectability. (One page of footnotes is appended.) (MM)

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Esquire, Coronet and Ken Magazines

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Jack A. Nelson
Department of Communications
Brigham Young University
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In these times of sophisticated demographic studies, readership projections, and corporate decisions of profit potential of a projected publication, it is refreshing to look at a man and a publishing company that operated successfully mostly on whim and instinct. In addition, one result was a magazine that still thrives more than 50 years after its inception--a publication that has spawned dozens of imitations. This paper looks at the business methods of a prominent publisher who at one time bragged that he succeeded in the magazine business without editorial policy or method.

When David A. Smart burst on the American magazine scene with Esquire in 1933 at the height of the Depression, some felt he had simply made a lucky guess. As he followed that publishing venture with other profitable magazines, however, it became apparent that Smart had a shrewd sense of the market and had gathered talented people around him to put his ideas into effect.

Unorthodox, brash, and a strong believer in fate, he plunged ahead in the magazine business, sometimes on an impulse or a hunch, where other publishers would have shuddered to venture. For a time it seemed everything he touched during the depth of the Depression turned to gold. His little art magazine, Coronet, started in 1936, was richly illustrated and became a collectors' item. Another art magazine, VerveMDNM, that he bought on a whim, printed specially commissioned covers by some of the world's great artists. However, his fortunes turned briefly in 1938. A news weekly he started, Ken, floundered and died after a short career when the editors found advertisers didn't like their political policies.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska on 4 October, 1892, Smart moved with his

parents when he was young to Chicago's West Side. After a two-year try at high school, the outspoken and brash youth started by selling hats. A born salesman and entrepreneur, Smart got a job selling advertising for the Chicago Tribune in 1911. Soon he was selling more classified ad lineage for the Tribune than anyone had ever sold before. When his astonishing commissions came to the attention of Col. McCormick himself, Smart was put on a regular salary, which had the effect of cutting his salary by nine-tenths. Resolving never to work for anyone but himself again, he left the Tribune and started his own ad agency.(1)

During World War I, Smart served in the field artillery with the A.E.F. in France, where he was slightly wounded. After the war, as his brother remembered in Arnold Gingrich's account of the early days of Esquire, Nothing But People, 'he had a derby hat, a raccoon coat, a Stutz Bearcat, and a roll that would choke a horse.' He was ready for a new venture. A quick fling at playing the commodity market, in which he first earned \$750,000 in sugar and then lost all but \$50,000, made him wary. With his brother Alfred as secretary-treasurer, he went back into the advertising business, starting the David A. Smart Publishing Company in 1921. Always an idea man, he hired salesman to sell booklets, calendars and other advertising gimmicks that would not be printed until after the orders were in, taking no chance of being stuck with inventory--a principle that accounted for much of his success during the years when other publishers were foundering. He formed an uneasy partnership with William S. Weintraub, a sales genius who ended up promoting and selling the things Smart thought up. Their first venture was with the National Men's Wear Salesman, a mildly successful trade magazine they had modeled after Printer's Ink.

Shortly afterwards they began publishing Gentleman's Quarterly, a

lavishly illustrated stylebook for men's stores to give away--a new idea for stores to issue catalogues in the guise of magazines at regular intervals. Also Smart produced a series of advertising booklets circulated to men's wear stores and another aimed at banking institutions.

Neither Smart nor Weintraub were editors or writers, however, and they needed a talented writer to put Smart's ideas into practice. He found him in Arnold Gingrich, a young advertising copywriter at Kuppenheimer Clothes. Gingrich was to guide the major magazines of the company as editor for nearly three decades, with a seven-year hiatus which he spent in Europe following World War II.

The company brought out Apparel Arts in 1931, a trade magazine 'so elaborately printed that it makes Fortune look like a pulp magazine,' according to Gingrich in his memoirs, *Nothing But People*. Expensive to print, it was of such quality that haberdashers reported customers were stealing copies.

In a real sense, Smart backed into publishing of consumer magazines. Prodded by the thought that there was such demand for a men's fashion magazine even during the worst of financial times, on a whim they decided to launch one. Smart and Gingrich spent the night pasting up a dummy that focused not only on fashion but on other topics of interest to men. Thus during the height of the depression in 1933, contrary to the best advice, he launched *Esquire*, which appeared October 15, 1933. A men's fashion magazine was unheard of at that time, and his price of 50 cents per copy brought dire predictions of failure, for almost everyone agreed there was hardly a loose half dollar in the country. But he hedged his bets by having Weintraub--who seemed to be able to sell anything--with only a rough dummy of the projected magazine in his hand, scour the country to get guarantees

from men's clothing shops to sell 100,000 copies through their stores. Convinced that there were only a few people willing to lay down 50 cents for a magazine during those tough times, a distributor assured Smart that he could count on a maximum of 5,000 newsstand sales, with half of those likely to be returned unsold. With that projection of 105,000 sales they put together the magazine. At that time 100,000 copies was regarded as the norm for outstanding magazines such as Atlantic, Harpers, and Fortune. Esquire's initial issue was relatively staid, with a cover showing two campers emerging from a floatplane on a Canadian lake. But it was oversize, on glossy paper, with about a third of its 116 pages in color.

Called Esquire: the Quarterly for Men, it appeared on October 15, 1933 and within five hours the newsstand copies had sold out and same distributor was on the phone screaming for more and advising the magazine to change from quarterly to monthly immediately. Five thousand of the copies remained with the men's stores, but the others were retrieved and placed on newsstands where they quickly sold. The second issue, dated January 1934, came out as a monthly, appearing on the day Prohibition was repealed. It featured the debut of the ribald puppet figure that came to be associated with Esquire magazine--Esky, the little bug-eyed gentleman-- climbing over the rim of a champagne glass.

Like much of the first issue, the title itself was something of a fluke. "Every title imaginable had been copyrighted," according to the Literary Digest, When the firm's lawyer wrote that all the proposed names were 'out,' he had addressed the letter to Arnold Gingrich, Esq. Seeing it, Smart shouted, "Esquire, that's our title!"(2)

The first issue featured articles by impressive names that Gingrich had lined up: Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, William Mcfee, Erskine

Caldwell, Manuel Komroff, Dashiell Hammett, and sports pieces by Gene Tunney, Bobby Jones and Ring Lardner jr. In addition, almost by accident the full page color cartoons helped the magazine make an immediate splash. The New Yorker had established the full-page cartoon, but never in color. But when the editor found himself with 13 extra full pages of color to fill, he happened to have on hand a batch of excellent color cartoons. Of the total of 124 pages in the first issue, 27 of those ended up cartoons. Smart and Gingrich had found a young artist in Harlem, E. Simms Campbell, whose drawings and cartoons in color were featured in the first issue and for the next quarter century.

Probably no American magazine had ever featured so much color and artwork. Among its regular features, the long-limbed, curvaceous beauty clad in a gossamer gown and known as the Petty Girl became as well known as the Gibson Girl of an earlier time. During World War II the magazine changed somewhat. To try to get favorable consideration for paper allotments it courted the servicemen audience with pinups of gorgeous creatures, often double-page spreads. Some Esquire supporters even seriously suggested there might be a lowering of soldiers' morale without the Varga girl. The girly-magazine image was later shed as Playboy emerged to capture that audience following the war.

Part of the reason for the magazine's success was that it got top writers cheaply because it was willing to publish almost anything they wrote, which meant things other publishers turned down. Writers liked it because they were not forced to fit into trite fiction formulas then current. At the very first a deal was struck with Hemingway to use his contributions at double the rate for their usual contributors. With him in tow, his name opened the doors of other writers. Although the rates were

low, Gingrich paid immediately, an important factor when many magazines were on the verge of bankruptcy and left their writers hanging for payment. In 1936, lacking his monthly column, Hemingway sent a story he had recently finished. Recognizing the brilliance of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," the magazine paid him double his usual \$500 rate--the most Esquire had paid for a story to that time. The following year, when public stock was sold in the magazine, Smart dealt Hemingway 1,000 shares of stock in recognition for his part in the success of the magazine.

For a decade Esquire was a magazine of literary distinction. It featured D.H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, Thomas Wolfe, Paul Gallico, H.L. Mencken, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Maurice Hindus, Bennett Cerf, Dos Passos, and Gilbert Seldes--and even one appearance by Thomas Mann, due mostly, no doubt, to his literary agent.

With this mixture of what became known as "sex and erudition," the magazine was profitable from the very start. For one thing, in its audacity it carried articles other magazines wouldn't touch. For instance, an article published in 1937 titled "Women are Like Gongs" described how women were no good unless regularly and soundly thrashed and spanked. According to Scribners Magazine the following year, "it would have been published by no other editor in this country." (3)

Or there was the case of "Latins are Lousy Lovers," a piece with harsh reflections on the masculinity of those south of the border. That article resulted in the magazine being banned in Cuba. (4) Naturally Smart, Weintraub and Gingrich smiled tolerantly, considering the resultant publicity and rising circulation figures. In Esquire's third year of publishing, Literary Digest estimated Smart was netting \$1,500,000 annually.

In fact, Esquire reached a circulation of 675,000 by 1937.(5) According to Time Magazine of that day, "... publishers like it because it made the men's clothing industry 'ad' conscious; women like it for the effect it has on male dressing. . .; advertisers like it because it is still the best smoking-room magazine in the land."(6)

Smart's flamboyant management style was a puzzle to more traditional publishers. In 1937 Literary Digest reported that when he was confronted by a publisher friend and admonished for a lack of editorial policy at Esquire, he asked, "Your publications have strong editorial policies and a systematic organization. How are they doing?"

"They're running in the red, but. . . ."

"Then we'll run our publication without policy or system," Smart replied.(7)

His own working methods were just as foreign to most magazine journalists. During production time he was apt to grab a couple of his favorite artists and head to Florida for a fishing jaunt. From his Florida outpost he would sometimes tear apart an Esquire layout to insert an article he had read on the southbound train or some new drawings he had found.(8)

By November of 1936, following the astonishing success of Esquire, Smart launched an elaborately-colored, pocket-sized magazine--Coronet, subtitled "Infinite Riches in a Little Room." He viewed it as something the public ought to like, and if it didn't make money that was all right too because it would be offset by Esquire's burgeoning profits.(9) With a lively interest in art, Smart had the magazine filled with a wide assortment of art reproductions, along with nonfiction and fiction, all without advertising. On the cover it featured a reproduction of an old masterpiece, with other art reproductions inside. He sent the editor to prowl through the museums

of Europe looking for art to feature in the magazines. Coronet started with something of a bang, an initial sale of more than 250,000. However, circulation had dropped to only 80,000 by 1940 and the magazine was on the ropes until a new editor was installed, who changed it from an art magazine to a competitor for Reader's Digest, divested of its exclusiveness, originality, and artistic appeal. The covers were given over to photos of starlets, and formula articles of other pocket-size magazines filled the pages. But circulation rose. By using his paper allotment during World War II in a clever way, Smart was able to save Coronet during the war.

Advertising was added in 1947, when Time reported that Coronet had been built from a wobbly offspring of Esquire into a 2,000,000 plus circulation, larger than its parent.(10) The magazine lasted until 1961, when it was sold to Reader's Digest.(11)

As an epitaph for Coronet, Gingrich observed after its death that it is as fatal to be too early as too late. In a speech to the Association for Education in Journalism in 1963, he said, "That lovely little magazine, full of treasures of the world's great museums, was about twenty-five years ahead of the great art boom, on which it might have ridden like a surfboard."(12)

By 1937 it seemed that everything Smart and his partners touched turned to gold, leaving the publisher exclaiming, "This publishing business is a lead-pipe cinch," as Arnold Gingrich explains in the memoirs.

An incident in the spring of 1937 explains the mercurial nature of David Smart and his impulsive methods in the publishing business. He had gone to Paris to seek acupuncture treatment for recurring migraine headaches, when he met a woebegone, downcast Greek who spoke no English in the apartment of a friend there. The friend explained that E. Teriade was

devastated because he had just come from an interview with the patron of his struggling art magazine, Minotaur, and the patron had brutally thrown him out on the street and withdrawn all funds. On the spot Gingrich told him that he would buy the little magazine, sight unseen. "I've got one art magazine now, so I might as well have two," Smart told the astonished friend, according to Gingrich. Smart got precious little for his \$1,000 investment for the deal, considering the former patron retained the title and all the other properties of the magazine.

In searching for a new title, Gingrich chose Verve for the quarterly because it meant the same in French as in English and lent itself to unusual treatments. However, Teriade turned out to be a first rate editor and negotiator. Picasso, Matisse and Chagall all did covers for the magazine. Today copies are collectors items of considerable value. Gingrich reported the color plates to be "among the best examples of craftsmanship that have yet appeared." Produced in France and edited in both French and English across the Atlantic, the rich-looking publication sold for \$2.50 and \$3.50 an issue. The sponsorship of Verve continued until 1939, when Smart withdrew his support. The magazine suspended in 1940, but continued in occasional editions following the war. (13)

In 1940 the shaky relationship between Smart and William Weintraub ended on less-than-amiable terms, with Weintraub leaving to start his own advertising agency.

By 1937, with the success of Esquire and Coronet and deciding that making money in publishing was easy, Smart stubbed his toe in the magazine business. Two years after launching Coronet, he decided to publish a news magazine--with photographs. The partners had noted the public's disillusionment with the press--particularly in the reporting of the Spanish

Civil War--and their magazine was to be for those who had lost faith in the integrity of reporting the world. Smart, Gingrich and a foreign correspondent for the Chicago Tribune named Jay Cooke Allen decided there was a demand for a more liberal reporting of the news, presenting background stories of events as insiders saw them. It was called Ken: The Insider's World. Smart saw it as a cross between Nation and Life, ``. . . liberal and lively, something for the millions, not highbrow. . .but popular [and] full of illustrations,' George Seldes reported in an article in **Nation the month of Ken's initial issue.(14)

Ken made its appearance as a bi-weekly in April 1938, heralded widely with much fanfare. It was supposed to be anti-war and anti-fascist, with such assistants as John Spivak, Paul de Kruif and Ernest Hemingway. Almost at once difficulties arose because of conflicts between editorial policy and potential advertisers. And in attacking both Communism and Fascism it alienated some readers and advertisers--including Hemingway, who insisted his name not appear on the magazine's masthead. It did enjoy some successes, however. Hemingway wrote of the war in Spain, John Malone on the sack of Nanking, and there were articles such as those about the cotton economy of the south and the plight of migratory workers in California. It also featured a rich use of photographs in documentary style. The policies of the magazine had little appeal for advertisers, however, and some of them even threatened to pull their ads from Esquire.(15)

In a last-ditch effort, Ken's format was changed. It became a weekly and the price was dropped to 10 cents. Finally in August of 1939, after losing \$400,000, Smart shrugged and ceased Ken's publication. He simply announced they had ``backed the wrong horse.''

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ended on less-than-amiable terms, with Weintraub leaving to start his own advertising agency.

Further difficulties rose four years after Ken's demise that threatened Esquire's very existence. Smart and his magazine earned an everlasting place in journalism histories in 1943 because of an epic battle fought with the Post Office Department over the moral tone of Esquire. On Labor Day weekend of 1943, Postmaster General Frank Walker ordered the owners to show cause why their second class mailing privileges should not be withdrawn. Over the years the Post Office officials had become something of a law unto themselves, denying cheaper mailing rates to publications suspected of obscenity even if prosecution was not actually intended. Walker said that Esquire was not, as the law required, "published for the dissemination of information of a public character, or devoted to literature, the sciences, arts or some special industry." Without the favorable second class rates, Esquire's owners realized they would have had to pay some additional \$500,000 a year to distribute their magazine--enough to threaten its survival. They took the Post Office to court. After a two year court battle in which other publications joined in support, a unanimous Supreme Court chastized the postal officials for trying to establish a requirement "that art or literature conform to some norm prescribed by an official." Esquire magazine kept its second class mailing privileges.(17)

To look for reasons for the success of the insouciant Esquire, it perhaps had a great deal to do with the way the editors defined their readers at a time when Americans' male egos were pummeled on every side. "Esquire," the editors wrote sedately in the first issue, "is, as its name implies, for men. To analyze the name more closely, Esquire means, in the encyclopedia and dictionary sense, that class just below knighthood--the

cream of that great middle class between the nobility and the peasantry. In a market sense, however, Esquire simply means Mister--the man of the middle class. Once it was in fashion to call him Babbitt, and to think of him as a wheelhorse, with no interests outside of business. That's very outmoded thinking, however. For today he represents the New Leisure Class.'" Henry F. Pringle's assessment of the reader of Esquire in a 1938 Scribner's article was "...a very shaky bet to endow any universities, or to leave monuments behind him in the shape of any such good and lasting works. . . Try as we may we have yet to find a subject which he considers sacred. . . he cares not a whit for better wages for the masses, better working conditions or shorter hours. What he likes is the Old Leisure of 1929--and what he stands for is more mistresses and more champagne.'"(18)

After Gingrich left Esquire in 1945 to live abroad seven years, the magazine underwent revisions of content, typography, and makeup. The quality of the fiction and non-fiction declined. When Gingrich returned at Smart's request in 1952, however, he scrapped a fortune of manuscript inventory and with a new fiction editor and new art director, set out to recapture the magazine's lost distinction. It adopted a new seriousness of purpose, featuring such writers as Philip Roth, William Inge, Norman Mailer, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. For instance, Arthur Miller wrote *The Misfits* for the magazine.

For Dave Smart, Gingrich had returned from Europe just in time. When he was 42, Smart had met Gaby Dure (Edna Gabrielle Richards), a New York fashion model. According to Gingrich it was the first time the debonair publisher had regarded an adult woman with motives other than predatory. He married her on the eve of his 50th birthday in the fall of 1942.(19) Shortly after Gingrich took over Esquire for the second time, Smart went into the

hospital for surgery to remove a minor polyp, and died during the operation on October 16, 1952 at age 60.(19)

David's younger brother John moved to the presidency of Esquire, Inc. and later became president of the board. It also published the Gentleman's Quarterly, a publication that grew out of their earlier Apparel Arts. In 1988 Esquire was continuing to prosper as perhaps the best monument to the audacity and vision of David A. Smart and Arnold Gingrich.

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END NOTES

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